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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was administered to three groups: 21 therapists counseling incestuous families, 30 counselors working in settings other than those dealing with incest, and 30 members of the general public. The results of an analysis of variance indicated that there were significant differences between the counselors and members of the general public. Nonpsychotic, well functioning people did experience incest fantasies. However, the counselors fantasized more, had better feelings about their fantasies, and reported more types of incestuous fantasies than did members of the general public. The results indicated that counselors were more aware and accepting of feelings and fantasies which the members of the general public consider taboo. Counselors need to help clients become more aware of their own fantasies, resulting behaviors, and the effect of sexual tension in the home on familial interactions. (Author/BEF)

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Attitudes Toward the Expression of Incestuous Fantasies

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Running head: Incest Fantasy

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Attitudes toward the Expression of Incestuous Fantasies

Incestuous fantasies have been proposed to provide evidence of defective ego and/or superego functioning (Fenichel, 1945; Keiser, 1953). Werman (1977) reported that incest fantasies have been recognized as a serious form of regression in clients with borderline personalities. Werman also feels it would be difficult to estimate the frequency of incestuous fantasies in nonpsychotic clients, though they can occur. Werman found the occurrence in nonpsychotic clients related to excessive early sexual stimulation, the use of defense mechanisms, and repression of other aspects of the Oedipal conflict.

Summit and Kryso (1977) reported that men influenced by incest fantasies about their daughters may take various courses of action. They may attempt to act out the fantasy, they may become overtly seductive seeking gratification just short of incest, or at the opposite extreme, they may terminate a close relationship with the girls in order to hide their feelings. Summit and Kryso propose that these men are not psychotic or abnormal. Rather, they are normal men who are overcome by their feelings.

Giaretto (1976) stated that sexual tension plays an important part in family interactions. As family members become more aware of this tension and the resulting fantasies which can be produced, interactions can be the result of conscious action rather than suppressed feelings.

The purpose of this study was to discover whether incest fantasies did occur in nonpsychotic individuals, if people were willing to admit their occurrence, and their attitudes toward them.

Method

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the groups sampled, two counselor groups and one composed of members of the general public, were assumed to be non-psychotic. It was presumed that by sampling these groups, a determination of the occurrence of incest fantasies could be made. The resulting hypothesis for this study was that there would not be a difference between counselors working with incestuous families, counselors working in settings not involved in incest, and members of the general public in their attitudes toward the expression of incestuous fantasies.

Operational definition of incest. Many definitions of incest exist. For the purpose of this study, a definition allowing each respondent the ability to include all behaviors believed to be incestuous was needed. The definition arrived upon and used was: Incest is sexual activity occurring between blood relatives. Note, the illegal nature of incest was not included. Neither a particular sexual act nor marriage was stressed. Also, this definition did not enumerate particular familial relationships of the participants.

Sample. The first group sampled consisted of 21 counselors (9 male and 12 female) at the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program (CSATP). The average age was 31 years and the average income was between $11,000 and $16,000. Eleven were parents and 10 were non-parents. CSATP, located in San Jose, California, attempts to relieve the trauma the victims of incest and their families experience.

The second group consisted of 30 graduate students (12 male and 18 female) enrolled in therapy classes at two California Universities.

The average age of this group was 27 years and the average income was between $7,000 and $11,000 per year. Thirteen were parents and 17 were non-parents. These students worked as counselors in San Francisco bay area agencies not treating incestuous families.

The third group consisted of 30 adults, 18 males and 12 females, who had some college education. The majority were not in college when concacted. The average age was 25 years. The average income was in the $11,000 to $16,000 bracket. They were evenly divided between parents and non-parents. This third group represents a subset of the general public and though generalized conclusions cannot be made, it provides a useful comparison with the two conselor groups.

Data collection. This research was undertakes as a questionnaire study. Each group received the same questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed with many items using a Likert scale format.

The results of the data collection were subjected to an analysis of variance test (ANOVA). The ANOVA determined if the mean responses of each group differed significantly. Rejection of the null hypothesis at the .05 level entailed supplementary analysis by the Scheffe Post Hoc Means Comparison Method.

Results

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows the mean responses of the groups sampled and reveals many significant differences between these groups.

The counselor groups found fantasizing about sexual activity in general more pleasant than the "general public" group. The counselor groups were more willing to report having incestuous fantasies than the "general public" group, who reported they never had such fantasies. The abuse counselors were willing to report incest fantasies involving their parents or children significantly more often than the other groups. Also, abuse counselors reported feeling less guilty about their incest fantasies than the other counselor group who reported less guilt feelings than the "general public" group.

The age when the counselor groups reported having most incestuous fantasies was 10 years. Again, the "general public" group reported that they never had incestuous fantasies.

When asked to fantasize an incestuous relationship, all groups agreed that they would be angry with themselves if they were to become involved in an incestuous relationahip with their children. All group members reported that they would not be angry at their children for being forced to engage in incest.

Conclusion

It appears evident from this study that nonpsychotic, well functiong people did experience incest fantasies, The results have shown that the counselor groups were more aware of their incestuous fantasies than the "general public" group. Perhaps this is due to the extensive training programs these counselors have experienced. These programs have encouraged the counselors to become more open and accepting of themselves, their feelings, and fantasies. In essence, these programs may have given the

counselors permission to become aware of taboo and unaccepted fantasies and attitudes. In contrast, the "general public" group was not aware of or perhaps unwilling to report their incestuous fantasies, perhaps due to the stringent nature of the taboo against incest.

To counteract this strong taboo against thought, it appears to be particularly important that counselors help clients become aware of their own fantasies and the resulting implications they can have on behaviors. It would also be important to help clients become aware of the sexual tension that exists in the home and the result this can have on familial interactions. In this way, clients will be more effective in consciously choosing courses of action in their interpersonal relationships. Also, by doing so, clients can learn that desires and fantasies can be resolved intrapsychically and need not interfere with family interactions.

This study was preliminary and exploratory in nature. Much research needs to be conducted in the area of incestuous fantasies. This is a step in that direction. Hopefully other researchers will attempt to follow-up and further the work in this area.

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